

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SIXTH SEASON

**Chicago Symphony Orchestra**

**Riccardo Muti** Zell Music Director

**Yo-Yo Ma** Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

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Thursday, May 11, 2017, at 8:00

Friday, May 12, 2017, at 1:30

Saturday, May 13, 2017, at 8:00

**Riccardo Muti** Conductor

**Music by Johannes Brahms**

Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90

Allegro con brio

Andante

Poco allegretto

Allegro

**INTERMISSION**

Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98

Allegro non troppo

Andante moderato

Allegro giocoso

Allegro energico e passionato

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**This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.**

## Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833; Hamburg, Germany  
 Died April 3, 1897; Vienna, Austria

### Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90



The Chicago Symphony Orchestra played Brahms's Third Symphony in its very first season. By then, Johannes Brahms, still very much alive, had stopped writing symphonic music. It was a time of tying up loose ends, finishing business, and

clearing the desk. (At the end of that season, in the spring of 1892, Theodore Thomas, the Orchestra's first music director, invited Brahms to come to Chicago for the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition, but the composer declined, saying he didn't want to make the long trip.) It's hard today to imagine that Brahms's Third Symphony was once a challenging work of contemporary music. Yet several hundred people walked out of the first Boston Symphony performance in 1884, and the critic for the *Boston Gazette* called it "painfully dry, deliberate, and ungenial." (It had been introduced to America a month before at one of Frank van der Stucken's Novelty Concerts in New York.)

Even when Brahms's music was new, it was hardly radical. Brahms was concerned with writing music worthy of standing next to that by Beethoven; it was this fear that kept him from

placing the double bar at the end of his First Symphony for twenty years. Hugo Wolf, the adventuresome song composer, said, "Brahms writes symphonies regardless of what has happened in the meantime." He didn't mean that as a compliment, but it touches on an important truth: Brahms was the first composer to develop successfully Beethoven's rigorous brand of symphonic thinking.

Hans Richter, a musician of considerable perception, called this F major symphony Brahms's *Eroica*. There's certainly something Beethovenesque about the way the music is developed from the most compact material, although the parallel with the monumental, expansive *Eroica* is puzzling, aside from the opening tempo (*Allegro con brio*) and the fact that they are both third symphonies. Brahms's Third Symphony is his shortest and his most tightly knit. Its substance came to him in a relatively sudden spurt: it was mostly written in less than four months—a flash of inspiration compared to the twenty years he spent on his First Symphony. Brahms was enjoying a trip to the Rhine at the time, and he quickly rented a place in Wiesbaden, where he could work in peace, and canceled his plans to summer in Bad Ischl. The whole F major symphony was written nonstop.

Above: A chalk drawing of Brahms by Olga von Miller, ca. 1880

**COMPOSED**  
1882–83

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**  
December 2, 1883; Vienna, Austria

**INSTRUMENTATION**  
two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**  
38 minutes

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**  
April 22 and 23, 1892, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting

July 11, 1936, Ravinia Festival. Hans Lange conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**  
July 15, 2011, Ravinia Festival. Christoph von Dohnányi conducting

March 26 and 28, 2015, Orchestra Hall. Edo de Waart conducting

March 27 and 29, 2015, Orchestra Hall. Edo de Waart conducting (Beyond the Score)

**CSO RECORDINGS**  
1940. Frederick Stock conducting. Columbia

1957. Fritz Reiner conducting. RCA

1976. James Levine conducting. RCA

1978. Sir Georg Solti conducting. London

1993. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Erato

The benefit of such compressed work is a thematic coherence and organic unity rare even in Brahms. Clara Schumann wrote to Brahms on February 11, 1884, after having spent hours playing through the work in its two-piano version: “All the movements seem to be of one piece, one beat of the heart.” Clara had been following Brahms’s career ever since the day he showed up at the door some thirty years earlier, asking to meet her famous husband Robert. By 1884, Robert Schumann—Brahms’s first staunch advocate—was long dead, and Brahms’s on-again-off-again infatuation with Clara was

off for good. But she was still a dear friend, a musician of great insight, and a keen judge of his work.

**S**urely, in trying to get her hands around the three massive chords with which Brahms begins, Clara noted in the top voice the rising F, A-flat, F motive that had become Brahms’s monogram for “frei aber froh” (free but joyful), an optimistic response to the motto of his friend Joseph Joachim, “frei aber einsam” (free but lonely). It’s one of the few times in Brahms’s music that the notes mean something

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## PLAYING BRAHMS IN CHICAGO

By Phillip Huscher

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has a formidable history of playing Brahms’s four symphonies. The Orchestra performed the Third Symphony in April 1892, on the final concert of its very first season, and Theodore Thomas, the Orchestra’s founder and music director, introduced the others, one by one, in each of the next three seasons. Both Thomas and his successor, Frederick Stock, placed Brahms’s orchestral music at the heart of the Orchestra’s growing repertoire. In fact, for eighty-three consecutive seasons, there was at least one symphony by Brahms featured every year.

Thomas was a pioneer in introducing Brahms to this country. By 1891, when he founded the Chicago Orchestra, he had been performing the composer’s music in public for nearly forty years—from the time Brahms was a completely unknown name in America. In fact, when Thomas made his New York debut as a violinist in 1855—he was just twenty at the time—performing chamber music with the brilliant young pianist William Mason, he played in the world premiere of Brahms’s B major piano trio, the first of the composer’s works to be heard in the country, and the only one to be performed in the United States before it was given in Europe. Once Thomas decided to become a conductor in the early 1860s, fired by the idea of introducing the landmarks of orchestral music to the

American public, he became Brahms’s most powerful champion in the United States.

In 1877, the year after the long-awaited premiere of Brahms’s First Symphony in Germany, Thomas and his chief rival, Walter Damrosch—the two most commanding conductors in New York at the time—fought over the chance to be first to play the work in this country. Thomas acquired the rights and announced the premiere for January 1878, but Damrosch outsmarted him and gave the U.S. premiere three weeks earlier. (According to the most popular account, a friend of Damrosch convinced Gustav Schirmer, Brahms’s U.S. publisher, to let him borrow the new score overnight for study purposes, and then delivered it to Damrosch’s house, where a team of copyists was waiting to work through the night to prepare the orchestra parts.) The New York press made much of the rivalry: after both men had led the symphony in New York that winter, one paper reported that in the third movement Damrosch conducted eighty-five beats to the minute and Thomas only sixty-four, implying, without musical logic, that Damrosch was the winner. Over the next several years, Thomas continued his campaign to introduce Brahms’s music to the American public; he gave the first U.S. performances of Brahms’s Piano Concerto no. 2 and *Double Concerto* in New York, and introduced the *Variations on a Theme*

by Haydn in Boston on tour with his own orchestra.

By the time Thomas moved to Chicago in 1891 to start the Chicago Orchestra, he had already conducted all four of Brahms’s symphonies with the New York Philharmonic, and he clearly intended to play them regularly in Chicago. When he led the Third Symphony at the close of the first season, the press was encouraging. “Brahm’s [sic] Symphony is in every respect a masterly and a thoroughly delightful creation,” the writer for the *Chicago Tribune* reported, going on to call Brahms “a master who writes not merely because he would demonstrate his skill in the technique of composition, but because he has a musical message for the world.” But the Chicago public was not yet convinced. When Thomas was told that local audiences didn’t like Brahms, he is supposed to have shrugged and said, “Then I will conduct him until they do.” According to Thomas’s wife Rose,

There was no composer of any nationality for whose music Thomas did so much in this country, for he played the Brahms symphonies directly against the popular will every year of his life, until the public grew to understand and appreciate them in spite of themselves.

During his first season in Chicago, Thomas was named music director

beyond themselves. That particular motive can be pointed out again and again throughout the symphony—it's the bass line for the violin melody that follows in measures three and four, for example. Clara also can't have missed the continual shifting back and forth from A-natural to A-flat, starting with the first three chords and again in the very first phrase of Brahms's cascading violin melody. Since the half step from A-natural down to A-flat darkens F major into F minor, the preeminence of F major isn't so certain in this music, even though we already know from the title that it will win in the end.

In four measures (and as many seconds), Brahms has laid his cards on the table. In the course of this movement and those that follow, we could trace, with growing fascination, the progress of that rising three-note motive, or the falling thirds of the violin theme, or the quicksilver shifts of major to minor that give this music its peculiar character. This is what Clara meant when she commented that "all the movements seem to be of one piece," for, although Brahms's connections are intricate and subtle, we sense their presence, and that they are unshakable.

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for the World's Columbian Exposition, set to open in May 1893. Thomas intended to make music a central part of the fair's activities, and he invited Brahms, who had never set foot on these shores, to appear as the White City's honored guest. Brahms demurred. On September 1, 1892, he wrote to Thomas, saying he was greatly tempted but afraid he would back out at the last moment. "Kindly excuse, then, the old-country man who cannot undertake the long voyage so lightly as you do, and turn over to another of our colleagues the honor and pleasure of representing German music at the exposition." Dvořák ended up being the fair's most famous visiting composer instead, and Thomas paid tribute to Brahms by leading a concert entirely of his works with the Chicago Orchestra in the first month of the exposition. (An all-Brahms concert was highly unusual fare in those days.)

Despite Thomas's efforts, Chicago was slow to warm to Brahms's music. Even the local critics were largely indifferent or unimpressed. "The composer is tiresome to the degree of being almost unbearable," the *Chicago Times* wrote in 1895. The *Chicago Herald* said "his works, hardly without exception, are more for the musician and student than for the music-lover and nine-tenths of those who compose the average orchestral concert audience." But when Brahms died, in April 1897, the *Chicago Tribune* mourned him as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest composer of music in the world." The Chicago Orchestra played Brahms's Third Symphony in

his memory. On the program page, the piece was encased in a black box.

By then, the Chicago Orchestra had become America's great Brahms orchestra, with a peerless champion in Thomas and with ties to the composer himself. Bruno Steindel, Chicago's principal cello from the very first season, had played under Brahms in Berlin, where he held the same position with the Berlin Philharmonic for several years. Frederick Stock, who joined the Orchestra in 1895 as a violist—and would succeed Thomas as its music director—came to Chicago from the Cologne Orchestra, where Brahms was a regular visitor. (Stock would later make the Orchestra's first recordings of Brahms's music.) Thomas's commitment remained undimmed: he took the Fourth Symphony on the Orchestra's first tour to New York City, in March 1896, and the First Symphony was the centerpiece of the last program the Orchestra played in the Auditorium Theatre, in December 1904, before moving into its new home, Orchestra Hall.

Even then, Brahms was still something of a controversial figure in Chicago. Early in 1904, as Daniel Burnham's design for Orchestra Hall reached its final form, the names of five composers were incorporated just above the tall arched windows on the second floor. You can see them today, as you approach the hall: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Wagner. But one day in 2004, when I was looking over Burnham's architectural drawings in anticipation of the hall's centenary, I was startled

to see a different lineup. On the official east elevation, which is signed, approved, and dated May 18, 1904, it is Brahms's name that appears, not Schubert's. Over the summer, someone got cold feet. On the final detailed construction drawings of the band course inscriptions, dated in September, Schubert takes Brahms's place.

Was it too big a risk in 1904 to place Brahms's name on the front of a concert hall that, as Burnham wrote, "will last for some centuries, for which reason its projectors feel it a duty and a privilege to build something that Chicago can love and be proud of more and more from generation to generation." It is easy to imagine the thinking: Brahms hadn't even been dead a decade; his music was still new, his place in the public's affection uncertain. Schubert's name would add two letters to the stone carver's task but possibly save face in the long run. Yet, that season, when the Orchestra moved into its new home, it was Brahms who reigned on stage: Thomas programmed three of his symphonies and the Violin Concerto, in addition to the *Haydn Variations* and the *Academic Festival Overture*. The composer's presence in Chicago's musical life has not diminished since. Year after year, generation after generation, Brahms continues to sit at the heart of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's musical life: not one of the Orchestra's 126 seasons has passed without Brahms's music on its programs.

—P.H.

For all its apparent beauty, Brahms's Third Symphony hasn't always been the most easily grasped of his works. Brahms doesn't shake us by the shoulders as Beethoven so often did, even though the quality of his material and the logic of its development is up to the Beethovenian standards he set for himself. All four movements end quietly—try to name one other symphony of which that can be said—

and some of its most powerful moments are so restrained that the tension is nearly unbearable.

Both the second and third movements hold back as much as they reveal. For long stretches, Brahms writes music that never rises above piano; when it does, the effect is always telling. The *Andante* abounds in beautiful writing for the clarinet, long one of Brahms's favorite instruments. (The year the Chicago Symphony first played this symphony, Brahms met the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, who inspired the composer's last great instrumental works, the Clarinet Trio and the Clarinet

Quintet.) The third movement opens with a wonderful, arching theme for cello—another of the low, rich sounds Brahms favored—later taken up by the solo horn in a passage so fragile and transparent it overrules all the textbook comments about the excessive weight of Brahms's writing.

There *is* weight and power in the finale, although it begins furtively in the shadows and evaporates into thin air some

ten minutes later. The body of the movement is dramatic, forceful, and brilliantly designed. As the critic Donald Tovey writes in his famous essay on this symphony, "It needs either a close analysis or none at all." The latter will save the sort of scrutiny that's not possible in the concert hall, but two things do merit mention. The somber music in the trombones and bassoons very near the beginning is a theme from the middle of the third movement (precisely the sort of thematic reference we don't associate with Brahms). And the choice of F minor for the key of this movement was determined as early as the fourth bar of the symphony, when the cloud of the minor mode crossed over the bold F major opening. Throughout the finale, the clouds return repeatedly (and often unexpectedly), and Brahms makes something of a cliffhanger out of the struggle between major and minor. The ending is a surprise, not because it settles comfortably into F major, but because, in a way that's virtually unknown to the symphony before the twentieth century, it allows the music to unwind, all its energy spent, content with the memory of the symphony's opening. ■



**Brahms's summer lodgings outside Bad Ischl, Austria, ca. 1890**



**Richard Mühlfeld, for whom Brahms composed works including the op. 120 clarinet sonatas. Mühlfeld was principal clarinet of the Meiningen Court Orchestra from 1879 until his death in 1907 at the age of fifty-one. Photograph, ca. 1894, part of the Meiningen Museum collection of famous people**

## Johannes Brahms

### Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98



Brahms's good house-keeping has denied us an unfinished fifth symphony to set beside Mahler's Tenth and Bruckner's Ninth—two magnificent symphonies left incomplete at their composers' deaths. We know that Brahms was

working on a fifth symphony as early as 1890, during a trip to Italy; apparently he soon gave up on it. During the last years of his life, Brahms conscientiously destroyed or recycled any musical scraps cluttering his desk. He admitted using the opening of his fifth symphony in the string quintet, op. 111, the work he intended to be his last. ("It is high time to stop," he wrote to his publisher in the note that accompanied the score.) Although he went on to write a handful of great chamber works, he didn't return to orchestral music and destroyed all remaining evidence of a fifth symphony.

Brahms's Fourth Symphony is his final statement in a form he had completely mastered, although for a very long time he was paralyzed by the nine examples by Beethoven. Even Beethoven chose not to go beyond his own ninth, although he toyed with a new symphony two years before his death. It's difficult to imagine what Beethoven or Brahms might have done next, since their last symphonies seem to sum up

all either knew of orchestral writing. The difference is that Beethoven's choral symphony opened up a vast new world for the rest of the nineteenth century to explore, while Brahms reached something of a dead end. But what a glorious end it is. Brahms was never one to forge new paths—like Bach and Handel, he added little to the historical development of music—and yet he always seemed to prove that there was more to be said in the language at hand.

**B**rahms's Fourth Symphony begins almost in mid-thought, with urgent, sighing violins coming out of nowhere; it often disorients first-time listeners. (Brahms meant it to: he originally wrote two preparatory bars of wind chords and later crossed them out, letting the theme catch us by surprise.) The violins skip across the scale by thirds—falling thirds and their mirror image, rising sixths—a shorthand way of telling us that the interval of a third pervades the harmonic language of the entire symphony. (It also determines key relationships: the third movement, for example, is in C major, a third below the symphony's E minor key.)

Brahms has a wonderful time playing with the conventions of sonata form in the first movement. He seems to make the classical repeat of the exposition, but, only eight measures in, alters one chord and immediately plunges into the new harmonic fields of the development section. Listen for the great point of recognition—at *ppp*,

Above: Brahms, photographed by Fritz Luckhardt, ca. 1882

**COMPOSED**  
1885

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

October 25, 1885; Meiningen, Germany. The composer conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**

two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, strings

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**  
40 minutes

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**

February 17 and 18, 1893, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting

July 12, 1936, Ravinia Festival. Hans Lange conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**

January 17, 18, and 19, 2013, Orchestra Hall. Edo de Waart conducting

August 10, 2016, Ravinia Festival. David Zinman conducting

**CSO RECORDINGS**

1969. Carlo Maria Giulini conducting. Angel

1976. James Levine conducting. RCA

1978. Sir Georg Solti conducting. London

1993. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Erato

the quietest moment in the symphony—with which Brahms marks the recapitulation. For twelve measures, the music falters like an awkward conversation, the winds suggesting the first theme, the violins not seeming to understand. Suddenly they catch on and, picking up the theme where the winds left off, sweep into a full recapitulation capped by a powerful coda.

In the *Andante moderato*, Brahms takes the little horn call of the first measure and tosses it throughout the orchestra, subtly altering its color, rhythm, and character as he proceeds. A forceful fanfare in the winds introduces a juicy new cello theme. (It turns out to be nothing more than the fanfare played slowly.) Near the end, shadows cross the music. The horns boldly play their theme again, but the accompaniment suggests that darkness has descended for good.

The lightning flash of the *Allegro giocoso* proves otherwise. This is music of enormous energy, lightened by an unabashed comic streak—unexpected from Brahms, normally the most sober of composers. Here he indulges in the repeated tinklings of the triangle, and he later boasted that “three kettledrums, triangle, and piccolo will, of course, make something of a show.” Midway through, when the first theme’s thundering left foot is answered by the puny voice of the high winds, the effect is as funny as anything in Haydn.

Throughout his life, Brahms collected old scores and manuscripts—the autograph of Mozart’s great G minor symphony was a prized possession—studying their pages to see what history might teach him. More than once he spoke of wanting to write a set of variations on a theme he remembered from a cantata by Bach. But no one before Brahms had seriously thought of writing a strict passacaglia—a continuous set of variations over a repeated bass line—to wrap up a symphony. (Beethoven used a theme and variations in the finale of his *Eroica* Symphony [1803] and Brahms himself wrote a passacaglia to conclude the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*.)

The finale to Brahms’s Fourth Symphony isn’t a musty, academic exercise, but a brilliant summation of all Brahms knew about symphonic writing set over thirty-two repetitions of the same eight notes. Trombones make their entrance in the symphony to announce the theme, loosely borrowed from Bach’s Cantata no. 150, *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich* (I long for you, O Lord) [the cantata is no longer thought to be by Bach]. To bring the ancient passacaglia form into the nineteenth century, Brahms superimposes over his variations the general outline of sonata form, with an unmistakable moment of recapitulation midway through. A look at the finale in its entirety reveals the sturdy four-movement structure of the classical symphony: Brahms begins with eight bold and forceful variations, followed by four slow variations of yearning and quiet eloquence, an increasingly hectic dancelike sequence, and an urgent and dramatic final group that provides a triumphant conclusion.

One can follow Brahms’s eight-note theme from the shining summit of the flute line, where it first appears over rich trombone harmonies, to the depths of the double bass, where it descends as early as the fourth variation, supporting a luscious new violin melody. Even in the twelfth variation, where the theme steps aside so the focus is on the poignant, solemn song of the flute, the spirit of those eight notes is still with us. And as Arnold Schoenberg loved to point out, the skeleton of the main theme from the first movement also appears in the penultimate variation, like the ghostly statue in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. The finale is as magnificent and as satisfying as any movement in symphonic music; it’s easy to assume that, having written this, Brahms had nothing left to say. We’ll never know whether that was so, or, in the end, he simply ran out of time. ■

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**Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.**